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CONVERGING ON LOCAL SELF-RELIANCE

by James Robertson

The New Economics Foundation held a working conference at Wadham College, Oxford in July 1987 for sixty invited participants to discuss how to link local economic revival with community initiatives in the health and social sphere, and how to link both with a new approach to social investment.

Aims and Purposes

This two-day residential conference, largely financed by a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust, was designed to keep up the momentum on a number of issues raised by earlier NEF activities. One of the topics at The Other Economic Summit (TOES) meeting in 1985 had been 'Health, Wealth and the New Economics', and one of the topics at the 1986 meeting had been 'The Economics of Local Revival'. Then, later in 1986, as part of a project commissioned by the World Health Organisation (WHO), NEF had held a small one-day seminar on Social Investment. The aim of the conference was to pull these strands together.

This meant making connections between three lines of development, all of which are important for the new economics. All have been receiving increasing attention in recent years, but each has so far been pursued more or less separately by its own constituency of professionals and activists. The first is local employment initiatives and local economic regeneration. A great deal has been happening on this in all industrialised countries, and both the EEC and OECD have been playing an active part at the international level. The second is about care in the community and the decentralisation of social services, together with the increasing emphasis being given by WHO, national governments and local authorities to the role of community initiatives in health promotion and healthier public policies.

The third line of development concerns the concept and practice of social investment. In recent years, companies and individuals in the USA have been showing increasing interest in investing in socially valuable projects - an example that already shows signs of being

followed in other countries, including Britain. And government measures to encourage local community initiatives - for example in the fields of local employment and economic regeneration, and local health promotion and community care - are beginning to be seen as public sector social investment, to be financed and managed as such with a view to saving social costs and creating social wealth. These will have to be linked with techniques for social investment appraisal, social accounting and social audit - another topic before the conference.

A related issue is the need to reconsider the links between economic and social policies. But, at least in urban priority areas and other disadvantaged localities, it is more realistic to recognise the need for improved work opportunities, improved housing, an improved health and social environment, improved education, improved leisure facilities, improved incomes and, above all, an improvement in the capacity and confidence of local people to do more for themselves, as a single constellation of need - not a collection of distinct and separate needs to be met in distinct and separate ways, some economic and some social.

This raises the question of the relationship between the enabling approach which directly aims to empower local people and local communities to take more control over and responsibility for their own economic and social destinies, and the conventional top-down or 'trickle-down' approach to local economic revival, for example in the inner cities. Recently criticised and perhaps rather extreme examples of the latter have been yuppy-led growth in London's docklands, and the suggestion of golf course-led growth for Merseyside, Greater Manchester and surrounding parts of Lancashire. The idea of the latter is that building international-class golf courses will attract Japanese businessmen, who will set up branches of their firms nearby, thus creating some local jobs. This will bring money into the locality, some of which will eventually reach the poorest families and communities, therefore - in ways not precisely specified - enabling them to achieve access to resources and standards of employment, health, housing, education, skill, capacity and confidence which they do not now enjoy. The question of how these two approaches - bottom-up and top-down - can best complement and reinforce each other is something that no one has yet seriously tried to answer.

Highlights of the Programme

Sir Richard O'Brien opened the conference on the Wednesday evening with a talk on 'Faith in the City'. Among the points he made were the need to develop a managerial culture that includes commitment to the localities in which managers work, and the need to define and safeguard the economic rights of citizens - especially for young people reaching adulthood. In discussion it was suggested that economic thinking, now beginning to count human development not as a cost to the economy but as a means to better economic performance, needs to go a step further and find ways of counting it as the goal (or end) of economic activity.

For the first session on the Thursday morning, chaired by John Pearce of Strathclyde Community Business, papers had been circulated by John Stacpoole (formerly a Deputy Secretary in the Department of Health and Social Security) on 'Community Social Initiatives and Policies' and by Peter Kuenstler (Centre for Employment Initiatives) on 'Local Employment Initiatives and Local Economic Development'. Responses by Robin Guthrie (Director, Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust - now to be the new Chief Charity Commissioner) and by Malcolm Allen (Chairman, Community Initiatives Research Trust) stimulated a richly interesting discussion. There is space here to touch on only one of many important points: the suggestion that the proper function of government is the provision of enabling structures, to release and enable community initiatives and community care, not to manage them.

The next plenary session, on the Thursday evening, took the form of a Question Time discussion, with a panel consisting of Richard Best (Director, National Federation of Housing Associations), John Cassels (Director-General, National Economic Development Office), Caroline Miles (Chairman, Oxfordshire Health Authority), and Stephen O'Brien (Chief Executive, Business in the Community). Again, from a wide-ranging discussion, there is space to note just one point: the globalisation of business, and the strength of the nationalising and internationalising forces in the world economy, make it vitally important to distil a simple and clear and powerful idea to convey the

need and the potential for precisely the opposite - i.e. the systematic development of more self-reliant communities.

At the plenary session on the Friday morning, chaired by Martin Stott of Oxford City Council, Anna Whyatt (Chief Executive of Southwark Borough Council) spoke on the 'Local Authority Perspective'. She reminded the conference of some of the difficulties and challenges facing local government in Britain now, including the need to cope with privatisation of services, new policies on housing, the new community charge (or 'poll tax'), new education policies, and in many areas the intractable underlying problems of unemployment and poverty - exacerbated in Southwark and other parts of London by the explosion of affluence and inflated property prices spilling out from the City after the Big Bang. Have the opportunities for combined bottom-up/top-down approaches to local revival now disappeared? Or, as suggested in later discussion, if Mrs Thatcher and her colleagues are genuinely committed to enabling people to exercise more power in matters like housing and education, should this not predispose them to encourage self-reliant community initiatives more generally?

Much of the main work of the conference was done in workshop sessions, eighteen in all. Apart from people already mentioned, workshop leaders included: John Ashton (WHO Healthy Cities project); Peter Beresford and Suzy Croft (on support for family care and community initiatives); Tony Gibson (Lightmoor Project) on how to enable grass-roots community initiatives to take off; Charles Knevitt (Inner City Aid) on the role of community architecture in building local communities; Chris Webb (information Technology Consultancy Unit) on the potential role of information technology in support of local communities; Joan Davidson on resourceful community initiatives such as recycling, conservation, city farms, horticulture and energy saving; Bill Martin and Sandra Mason (Leisure Consultants) on the links between community leisure initiatives and community health, education, employment and other initiatives; Anne Miller on the potential support for local employment initiatives and for family and community care that a Basic Income Scheme could provide; Pat Conaty (Birmingham Settlement), Nigel Mason (Industrial Common Ownership Finance) and David Weston (Oxford Polytechnic) on community financial initiatives, such as credit unions and other forms of co-operative financing; and Janice Dolley (Open University) and

David Oddie (Rent-a-Role) on the potential for community arts and community education initiatives.

Reports and proposals from these workshops were edited into a document which was presented for discussion at the final session of the conference on the Friday afternoon.

A Tantalising Situation

Looking back on this conference four months later, I must admit to mixed feelings of satisfaction and frustration. The subject was of central significance to the new economics. The sixty participants made up an outstanding group of people, representing all aspects of the subject. There was a sense of excitement from beginning to end, and an active commitment on the part of many of those present to find ways of taking things forward. A long list of specific proposals was produced. Yet the conference has not achieved the breakthroughs we had hoped for. Even now we - that is, NEF - have not yet been able to get any follow-up projects launched. Perhaps it was unrealistic to hope for too much, too soon. Perhaps individual participants have been following things up in ways that we haven't yet heard about. Perhaps the conference has helped to shift perceptions in ways that will bear fruit two or three years from now. Time will tell about all those things. But one inescapable fact for now is that we in NEF have not yet acquired the resources to enable us to build directly on successful events of this kind.

It is a tantalising situation. And it applies to the new economics right across the board. There is so much that needs to be done and is ready to be done, and so much of it that we would now be able to help people to take forward. A top priority must now be to get ourselves into a position where we can spend the time and trouble it takes to put specific projects together, find the people to carry them out, and raise the funding for them.